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Effecting Change in Perspective is a Challenging (and Hence Critical) Endeavour

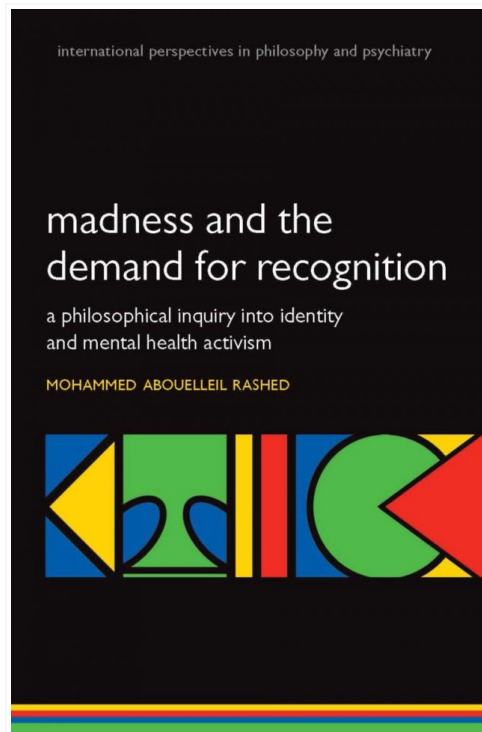
Posted on [May 15, 2019](#) by [Chris Pak](#)

On *Madness and the Demand for Recognition: A philosophical inquiry into identity and mental health activism* by Mohammed Abouelleil Rashed (Oxford University Press, 2019), and how 'soft and pure' disciplines must take the lead to enrich our repertoire in how we think about ourselves and others today

Book Review and Provocation by [Kai Syng Tan](#)

Mohammed Abouelleil Rashed's *Madness and the Demand for Recognition* (2019b) does not call itself 'the first comprehensive philosophical examination of Mad activism' for nothing. It's a book that shows philosophy at work and shows off the philosophical process, gathering and analysing discourses on, about and around mad activism. Situated in the philosophy of psychiatry, Mad studies, and activist literatures, the book 'develops a rich theoretical framework for understanding, justifying, and responding to Mad activism's demand for recognition' (cover). The [psychiatrist-turned-philosopher](#) proceeds with clinical precision: no term or concept is not subjected to intense scrutiny. As an arts professional, I'm particularly interested to learn the arguments around how "madness" relates to creativity, including how madness is a 'dangerous gift' (192) and, equally, how it isn't a sign of special "artistic" sensitivity because it affects 'Van Gogh, as it does bus drivers, plumbers, teachers, older people and children', as an ex-patient states (28). This relates to my own work (2020) on how the arts and artists are, historically and to this day, othered or exoticised within society and academia, including with such labels – and myths – as 'the tortured genius', which often artists and the arts industry itself can be complicit in. Indeed, Madness is a 'complex and contested term' with 'many formulations' 'through time and across cultures' (xxvii).

Any talk about 'culture' must address 'identity'; the case study of the infamous Rachel Dolezal — the white woman passing as black (149-154) — makes you contemplate the essence of identity and culture,



Book cover, *On Madness and the Demand for Recognition* by Mohammed Abouelleil Rashed (Oxford University Press, 2019)

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which Mohammed also patiently unpacks across Chapters 4, 6 and 7 in his quest to instate Madness as a 'valid' culture and identity worthy of recognition. This discussion resonates today, not least because [identity politics is so volatile](#). I'm also reminded of discourses around neurodiversity (which Mohammed mentions, p38). Like madness, neurodevelopmental conditions can be largely [invisible](#). Recent studies are increasingly interested in how conditions like [autism](#) and [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder](#) affect girls and women, who have traditionally been over-looked and who excel in 'passing' as 'neurotypical' or 'normal' (see for instance Mowlem et al. 2018; Livingstone and Happé 2017). Taken together, these points make me ask: *How does lived experience relate to theoretical framings? Who tells the story? Where are the reader and writer situated? Are we immersed, within, or outside, above or below, as chroniclers or observers? Do they echo the 'medical expert' versus 'patient' power dynamics? Are these positions discreet? Why the quest to 'pass' as someone or something else, to fit, or to fit in? Is the demand for recognition, paradoxically, somewhat a quest for a normality?*

As Mohammed argues, 'diverse ideas about madness can extend professional and public understanding of mental health'. Mental health matters, because we're amid a global mental health crisis, as a [Lancet report](#) states. To bring about policy and cultural change, [we must think outside the pillbox](#). The [All Party Parliamentary Group Report on Arts, Health and Wellbeing](#) argues that the arts can 'stimulate imagination and reflection' and 'change perspectives' (2017). Philosophy does that too, sitting on the [Becher–Biglan typology](#) as it does in the same quadrant as fine art as a discipline that is described as 'soft and pure', meaning that they emphasise understanding and interpretation (as opposed to, say, 'hard and applied' disciplines like medicine and engineering). But if 'soft and pure' sounds pornographic, it probably is. Why else would we use terms like, if you'd pardon my French, 'wankey' and 'mindfuck' when we talk about, say, the writings of E.M. Cioran or the paintings of Paula Rego? Don't such works stop us on our tracks, make us shake and gasp, in an almost visceral, violent [pleasure](#)? While no single template is bullet-proof with rock hard borders, this typology provides one explanation as to why art and philosophy are often the first departments to suffer funding cuts – [if not get slaughtered altogether](#).

Indeed, Mohammed's book reminds us of the importance of philosophy and art and, by extension, the arts and humanities – more so given our precarious times today. It's when resources are scarce, minds are closed, news are faked, and people more tribal, that philosophy, art and other 'soft and pure' disciplines *must take the lead* and *insist* on the initiating and developing processes and platforms for interpretation and understanding. Žižek [argues](#) that we 'need more than ever a profound new theory of what is happening today', and that 'the time for theory is today' (Jones 2018). I would modulate that to say that we need not one but a plurality of theories, *and practices*, and that things should get mixed up a little more. As [Mohammed eloquently states](#), it is 'not about replacing one master narrative with another' (2019a). As a philosophical unpacking – unravelling, even – of psychiatry, *Madness and the Demand for Recognition* reminds us of the importance of the arts and humanities to continue to talk to, argue with, infiltrate into other disciplines. As borders and boundaries leak, we can [gate-crash into and work with other fields – including medicine](#) and engineering. It's when disciplines become *im-pure*, and borders are softened, that we can disrupt the status quo and shift existing narratives, such as that of madness that the medical have hitherto dominated, to complicate and widen the discourse. Clearly, this is not something that one book – or libraries of books and generations of museums of artworks, for that matter – can do. Yet we must start somewhere, and join in existing efforts that those in [critical medical humanities](#) (Viney, Callard, and Woods 2015), and more recently, [visual medical humanities](#), for instance have been working on. As Mohammed states, 'effecting [...] change in perspective is a challenging endeavour', as it demands us to 'question and broaden our values and beliefs with respect to fundamental notions such as our sense of self and overall worldview'.

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'Difficult though as that may be, at least we can [...] view this (apparently) insurmountable difference for what it is: as a radical challenge to norms and concepts constitutive of who we are. Whether we should attempt, as a matter of moral obligation, to change these norms and concepts in order to accommodate a broader range of experiences and behaviors is a further question to be considered' (49).

Mohammed himself keeps the questions coming. Come May, he subjects his hypotheses to scrutiny, testing and contesting, through workshops with mental health practitioners and service-users – yes, people from other quadrants, and indeed beyond, outside of the ivory towers! – inviting participants to incorporate diverse ideas about madness in clinical practice and beyond. I'm excited to co-curate them with Mohammed, and to continue my conversations with him. I want to see how disciplinary knowledges rub up against each other and create what I have coined with a geographer 'productive antagonisms' (Latham and Tan 2016), and how we can, through a hands-on and embodied approach, *play* and challenge our own disciplinary assumptions and that of others, with another term I've coined, this time in conversation with a psychiatrist, 'ill-disciplined' – puns fully intended (Tan and Asherson 2018).

Ultimately, *Madness and the demand for recognition* is a demand for our collective recognition to, in Mohammed's terms, 'enrich the repertoire' for how we think about madness instead of settling for the current, 'impoverished' discourse (2019a). We can extend this call to any mis-represented and/or under-researched subject areas. If I were to write a book, mine will be entitled *ADHD in Women and the demand for recognition*. After all, ADHD, and *ADHD in women*, are highly-contested, complex, and hitherto, woefully ignored. However, my book will probably be non-linear, elliptical and ambiguous. Just as Mohammed's field work in Egypt (where madness isn't framed in psychiatric or medical terms) has powerfully and profoundly shaped his discourse (which can be considered a reply to dominant/Western thinking around madness), I will refer to the *Daodejing*, a little book of Chinese Daoist philosophy which has enlightened *myself* and many with its body-mind-world poetics to counter the stiff Cartesian dualist approach, and which is written like a poem, and somewhat *performs* madness, which Daoism aspire as a form of wisdom. Punctuated by images, my book will read fast, as if ADHD in action. Digressive and divergent, with a nod to neurodivergency, there will be plenty of loose ends and no clos....


Dr Mohammed Abouelleil Rashed is a Wellcome ISSF Research Fellow at the Department of Philosophy, Birkbeck College, University of London, and Visiting Lecturer at the Department of Philosophy, King's College London, UK. Read his related paper, In Defense of Madness, [here](#).

Dr Kai Syng Tan FRSA SFHEA is an artist, consultant and curator best known for gathering diverse and divergent bodies (and bodies of knowledge) across sectorial/disciplinary/geopolitical/cultural boundaries through programmes and projects like [RUN! RUN! RUN!](#) and [#MagicCarpet](#).

This post is a version of Kai's presentation during [Mohammed's book launch on 24 April 2019](#), Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London.

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